

Great Transformation: Recasting Regional Policy.

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Theme B. City and regional governance for a post-crisis age.

Social justice, devolution and the city-region: Greater Manchester as a new site of innovation?

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Introduction

On 3rd November 2014 the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, made the first of three significant announcements on changes to the way services are run across Greater Manchester. The devolution package that was on offer, and subsequently agreed, represents an important shift in the political authority of the city-region to exercise greater control over its services. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) and its ten members¹ have sought to engage with the devolution package in its different stages even accepting the condition of a transitional/temporary mayor (June 2015) leading to a directly elected mayor in May 2017. It represents an important experiment outside of London, in city governance in the UK. Scott (1996) and Storper (1997) highlight that city-regions stand out as a point of interest because they seem to be emerging as a key spatial unit in the ongoing restructuring of the global political economy. As political communities and as democratic publics, city-regions are both made up of smaller-scale communities situated in larger-scale communities. In this study we consider how the various scales of political community are democratically related and with a focus on context, we show how the ten authorities have worked on a collaborative city-region basis in the period preceding the devolution decision.

Investigative Framework

We examine here the management of urban renewal policy and practise in the five-year period leading up to and including the announcements from Osborne. Set within a backdrop of recession, austerity and a Conservative led Coalition government, and by using the 2010-2015 period, we can contextualise and examine social justice within a particular paradigm. We draw upon Susan Fainstein's notion of the 'Just City' (2010) and her evaluative criteria of diversity, democracy and equity within global cities as a framework to investigate urban renewal and governance in the city region of Greater Manchester. In *The Just City*, Susan Fainstein appears to set out "to develop an urban theory of justice and to use it to evaluate existing and potential institutions and programs" (Fainstein, 2010:5) in New York, London, and Amsterdam. She wants to make "justice the first evaluative criterion used in policy making" (Fainstein, 2010:6). By using Fainstein's framework it has been possible to examine the city-region of Greater Manchester, the political regimes and development outcomes. To

do this we analyse the different trajectories of different parts of the Greater Manchester city-region. Within the city-region we examine two wards adjacent to each other, although in the different council districts of Manchester and Salford, both are currently subject to programmes of urban renewal. Qualitative data collection for this research is based on a series of semi structured interviews with key representative and elite decision makers who have occupied positions in various organisational layers of the city-region institutions from within the public, private and community/voluntary sectors. This has allowed the research to draw on Fainstein's framework to examine social justice in the context of the globally connected city-region of Greater Manchester.

Social Justice, the city and austerity: initial findings

The initial findings from the research suggest that both Salford and Manchester each focus heavily upon economically driven development. Within this drive there also appears to be differing attitudes between and within the two places in terms of a shared understanding of leadership, cross-sector relationships and co-operative working. These findings have allowed us to critically reflect on the devolution agenda through Fainstein's criteria.

Recession, austerity and a shared understanding of leadership

The Coalition government led by David Cameron came to power in 2010 with a decentralised, localised policy agenda in planning. Indeed, Lowndes and Pratchett (2011) discuss that the Coalition's reforms do show traces of an ideological commitment to localism and a new understanding of local self-government and that there is an ideological agenda which has the potential to deliver a radically different form of local governance. The Coalition government has provided this localised agenda that has been implemented, in part, through the establishment of procedures for neighbourhood planning. However, along with these procedures have come hand in hand cuts to public sector spending that has had massive impacts upon various layers of the city-region. Whilst the Localism Act (2011) was introduced at devolving local powers, and the Coalition thought that perhaps the more power they can decentralise the better, but at the same time they centralised schools and health for example. The Coalition has contained within it certain contradictions with one part Big Society, one part localism, one part centralised control of public sector austerity. Even in the pursuit of city-led growth the Coalition never truly managed to articulate a position that overcame the previous contradictions between Liberal and Conservative, as their different views on what to do with the RDA's demonstrated (see for example Larkin, 2009). Despite devolution being in the pipeline it is serving a particular agenda. This agenda is neoliberal in essence, focused on creating the conditions for growth, rather than being concerned with social justice. On this point regarding responses and solutions to the problems of social and economic inequality Levitas (2012) contends that these ideas are by no means able to respond to the failures of the market and cannot make up for the dismantling of the welfare support and in the call for greater localism the state has to be the final arbiter of equality in terms of social and economic justice. We contend that Manchester can be seen as a key city-region in the Northern Powerhouse, leading a growth corridor, but it experiences severe pressure based on inequality in basic markets, such as housing and health.

Cross sector relationships and co-operative working

Within some of these markets we suggest that cross sector relationships appear to be fragile with no one person or organisation best placed to pull it together. Within the process of devolution there appears to be confusion in terms of coordination and who takes a lead role. The other aspect to this is to question whether the voluntary sector are able to step in as a process of deinstitutionalization takes place, as the state slowly retreats in some communities, but perhaps not all. The city leaders are at the same time, compromised but content to be focused on economic growth in the mistaken belief that they are becoming masters of their own destiny, but that this is at the expense of social needs. It is difficult, and perhaps unfair, to levy any real historic criticism towards the leaders of Manchester City Council in terms of economic regeneration, although there are gaps in attempts to enhance the social fabric on more local scales. The context of this is about economic growth as opposed to the ideologies of ‘social justice’ or ‘a fairer society.’ Devolution is the latest attempt to make cities responsible for their own growth but with less, and the LEP’s and the city growth agenda are part of this.

City-region governance

If the Coalition initially, and Osborne now, are serious about devolution then they would likely pay more attention to those such as (Sir Howard) Bernstein and (Sir Richard) Leese who appear to us to be able to understand local need. They therefore seem better equipped to make decisions on the deployment of resources to the benefit of the people in the Greater Manchester city-region. This illustrates the weakness of the devolution agenda currently led by Osborne. On the one hand he seems to lean on the leadership of the city-region to legitimise his agenda, but on the other refuses to commit to a more expansive devolution that would truly empower the politicians and officers across the Greater Manchester combined authority. The fact that eight of the ten borough councils have (for the most part) been Labour-controlled since 1986, has helped maintain an informal co-operation between the districts at a city-region scale for a number of years. There seems to be an effective working balance between the administrative leadership of Bernstein and the political leadership of a city region through Leese and with their counterparts in Westminster. However, this stands in contrast to nearby Liverpool city-region indicating that the relationship between local and national state is not uniform and importantly, could be said to have been embedded in earlier years of Manchester’s recent development (post Arndale IRA bombing) where the local governance proved to be capable enough to attract to new public and private investment (Ward, 2003).

Conclusions

We have looked briefly here at the dynamics currently in play in the devolution agenda in Manchester. We are witnessing a phased introduction of new models of governance for the city region and we are able to speculate on the implications of these changes for local leaders across the public and non-statutory sectors. Recession and austerity has remained a context-setting negative, constant across the different scales of governance that we have studied, both

in terms of hierarchy and across public and voluntary sectors. The term ‘austerity urbanism’ has been coined by Peck (2012) as a means of summarising and understanding urban policy in a context of extreme public expenditure cuts and Peck’s analysis rings true for what we are seeing in Greater Manchester, simultaneously to decisions on devolution taking place. As Fainstein suggests “there is nothing about regional bodies that automatically makes them vehicles for greater equity than that possible in the individual cities that might make up a fragmented region... [adding that] metropolitan governing institutions potentially can redistribute income, disperse affordable housing, encompass a diverse public, and offer the possibility of popular control of a level of government with greater capacity than small municipalities, but the likelihood that they will produce these results is slim” (Fainstein 2010:85). Indeed, in the context of devolution and the city-region there remain questions about social justice that have been marginalised and for this reason devolution in Manchester has yet to fulfil the ideal – even in a conceptual sense - as a new site of innovation.

Notes

1 – The ten Greater Manchester Combined Authorities (GMCA) constitute, Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council, Bury Metropolitan Borough Council, Manchester City Council, Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council, Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council, Salford City Council, Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council, Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council, and Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council.

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